



PALM Expert

Want to know how you can enjoy all your favourite films on your handheld? Julian Prokaza looks at a selection of software designed to put movies in the palm of your hand



X MARKS THE SPOT

Palm announced two new Palm OS handhelds at the beginning of October. The TX (the Tungsten name has been dropped) has the same design as the existing Tungsten T5, but has a steel blue plastic case instead of a silver one. It uses Palm OS Garnet 5.4.9 and has a 312MHz XScale processor with 128MB of non-volatile memory, of which 100MB is available to the user. The 320x480 screen is the same as that used on the LifeDrive and it too has built-in 802.11b WiFi and Bluetooth. It costs £250 and is available now.

At £80, the Zire 22 is at the low end of Palm's range of handhelds, but it comes with a 160x160 colour screen, 200MHz processor and 32MB of memory though not, as the Palm site states, a 32MB hard disk. It's about the size of a pack of playing cards and weighs just 96g.

■ SYNCHRONISE WATCH

Mass Storage Synchronizer is a free utility that allows an Apple iTunes music library to be synchronised with Sony Clie and Palm Treo handhelds. It only works with music codecs that are supported by the handhelds (so no DRMed iTunes Music Store tracks), but songs can be played using RealPlayer for Palm or Pocket Tunes. You can download it from www.teavuihuang.com/massstorsync.

■ ON THE EDGE

Palm OS handheld owners looking for RPG action should check out Edge. Released in October, this third-person isometric dungeon adventure incorporates all the staples from the genre, including three races, four character classes, a huge world map, real-time combat and dozens of spells. It runs full-screen on HiRes+ handhelds and is optimised for use on the Tapwave Zodiac. Judging by the screenshots on the site, it's pretty slick. We'll have a full review next month. It costs \$25 (around £14) from www.rzanerutledge.com/edge.



Given that the PlayStation Portable is being pitched as a portable video player and Apple's video iPod is waiting in the wings, it looks like handheld movies will be the next big thing for gadget fans. But Palm OS users can already watch movies on their handheld – they just need the right software.

All that's required to play video files on a handheld is the video file itself and a player program. But while high-resolution, high-bit rate video files don't cause a PC to break a sweat, the same can't be said for Palm OS devices. Most don't have the processor power to give smooth video playback with high-resolution files, let alone the storage capacity. So video files must first be

transcoded into a format suitable for smooth handheld playback.

This month we take a look at three of the most popular handheld video transcoders. We'll discuss ways to play video on a Palm OS device in next month's *Palm Expert*.

CONTACT

PALM EXPERT

If there is anything you would like to see covered in *Palm Expert*, please contact us at the address below

palm@computershopper.co.uk

REVIEW HANDHELD VIDEO TRANSCODER

KINOMA

Kinema Producer and Player 3

RATING ★★ ★★

PRICE Producer \$30 (around £17); Player \$20 (around £11)

DETAILS www.kinema.com

Kinema sells transcoding and playback programs for Palm OS devices in the form of Producer and Player. Kinoma Producer is very easy to use. Just drag the video files you want to convert on to its window and select the destination Palm OS device and video quality from three drop-down lists. The program chooses the appropriate video preset to give what it thinks will be the best performance on that device, and the files are then ready for transcoding. You can override this preset and adjust every aspect of video and audio quality if you want to.

Kinema Producer can transcode video compressed with any codec, including DVD movie VOB files, but it needs QuickTime to be installed and only uses MPEG-4 or CinePack Mobile codecs for output. Audio compression is limited to AAC, and this may create playback problems, since few Palm OS video players can handle this codec. Fortunately, Kinoma Player can, making it the ideal player for use with Kinoma Producer.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work terribly well. To be fair, when using Kinoma Producer's recommended

presets playback was smooth enough, but no wonder as the resolution is always less than full-screen. With the Sony Clie PEG-TH55 selected as the destination device, 'high-quality' video came out at 160x120; with the Palm LifeDrive it was 320x240. When we switched to full-screen 320x480 video the Kinoma Player went into slideshow mode on the Clie, dropping swathes of frames in the process. This wasn't a hardware problem, either – the same file played flawlessly using a different video player.

Since Kinoma Producer creates transcoded video that only Kinoma Player can play, and Kinoma Player needs a high-end handheld to play full-screen video well, this combination is best avoided unless you value ease of use over performance.





REVIEW HANDHELD VIDEO TRANSCODER

OMNIQUITI
PocketDivXEncoder

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DETAILS <http://divx.ppccool.com>

If you don't fancy shelling out for a video transcoder to watch movies on your handheld, try PocketDivXEncoder – it's free. It isn't Palm OS-specific, but simply transcodes video into DivX or XviD-encoded files that are suitable for playback on any handheld device.

Like Kinoma Producer, PocketDivXEncoder asks you to choose a destination device for the transcoded video, but this doesn't optimise playback performance; it simply sets the appropriate resolution for full-screen video. You can override this setting if playback is jerky, though. You can also adjust the frame rate and opt for two-pass encoding for better compression and video quality. Audio is encoded as MP3, so PocketDivXEncoder's output can be played by any video player.

Given the price, and the fact that it's only at version 0.3.5, PocketDivXEncoder is surprisingly capable and is straightforward to use. It can convert files individually or in batches. Transcoded full-screen video files were around a third smaller than those of Kinoma Producer, giving a compression ratio of about 5:1 with full-screen video. It can't convert QuickTime video, but since it handles everything else this is hardly a deal breaker.



REVIEW HANDHELD CASE

BOXWAVE
FlexiSkin

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE \$19 (around £11) plus \$7 (around £4)

delivery

DETAILS www.boxwave.com/products/flexiskin/flexiskin-handspring-treo-600_32.htm

Slipping a fun-size mobile phone into a fat leather case may seem crazy, but it doesn't stop people doing it. When that phone is the Palm Treo, a bulky leather suit is a poor choice. The BoxWave FlexiSkin, on the other hand, adds almost nothing to the dimensions of a Treo. It's made from silicone and, as the name suggests, it's a thin case that fits the Treo's form very closely. The Treo 650 model comes in a range of colours, but 600 owners have a choice of just clear or grey.

Since it's a one-piece moulded silicone shell, fitting the FlexiSkin is simply a matter of stretching it over the Treo. The case is surprisingly stretchy, but it doesn't deform and fits like a second skin. The Treo 650 model leaves the keyboard, screen and camera lens exposed but covers everything else, though there are holes for the speaker and microphone. The five-way control pad and application buttons are used through the case, but the silicone is thin and transparent enough not to affect their operation. The case has a good grip, and this not only makes the Treo less likely to slip through your fingers but also helps keep it in place on slippery surfaces such as a car dashboard.



✓ Tough; negligible weight and thickness

✗ No screen protection

REVIEW HANDHELD VIDEO TRANSCODER

PQDVD
Pocket-DVD Studio

RATING ★★★

PRICE \$37 (around £21)

DETAILS www.pq dvd.com/download

Neither Kinoma Producer nor PocketDivXEncoder lets you specify a target size for the transcoded video it produces, so if a file is too big to fit on your memory card you'll need to fiddle with the settings and transcode it again. Pocket-DVD Studio takes a different tack. It still lets you choose an output resolution for the transcoded video, but its overall quality is determined by the output file size you choose. You don't have free rein over this as the smallest and largest possible sizes are determined by the original video's quality (so no 1MB DVD movies), but it's still a user-friendly method.

Pocket-DVD Studio has a clean, simple interface, but there's no way to queue files for batch transcoding so you need to open each one individually. Unlike Kinoma Producer and PocketDivXEncoder, it can transcode video using any installed codec, although DivX and XviD are obviously most suitable for handheld playback.

As with the other two programs, Pocket-DVD Studio can also transcode DVD movie VOB files, although there's no legal way to transfer these from a DVD to a PC's hard disk. The program is also supposed to be able to transcode DVD movie discs directly, but we couldn't get this to work; Pocket-DVD Studio either hung or crashed on every attempt. Since it costs around £21 and offers no more features than PocketDivXEncoder, it's hard for us to recommend PQDVD's Pocket-DVD Studio.



VERSAMAIL CRASHES

Q I have a Palm LifeDrive and I am experiencing problems with VersaMail. The program frequently crashes, and the LifeDrive then needs a hard reset to get things working again, wiping all my data, music and photos in the process. Not a real drama, perhaps – unless you are away from home and relying on the Palm for entertainment, mail collecting and other functions. Any ideas?

Bob MacQueen, via email

A A similar problem affects the Treo 650 and it's documented on the Palm Support Knowledge Base (<http://kb.palm.com>, search for Solution ID 36541). It relates to a corrupted VersaMail database. The fix is explained in great detail on the site, and it might address your problem.

Why Palm didn't use a portion of the LifeDrive's hard disk for permanent backup purposes is anyone's guess. A hard reset erases all data stored on it, just as on any other Palm OS device. A post on the 1Src forums describes a hard reset trick that claims to preserve hard disk data, but we didn't have a LifeDrive with which to test it. You can read it at www.1src.com/forums/showthread.php?t=89990.

A good backup program and a memory card to store it on are vital for any Palm OS device used away from a computer for any length of time, but the LifeDrive presents a couple of problems. First, unless you buy a memory card to match the LifeDrive's 4GB capacity, you'll have to resign yourself to backing up just your most important data. Second, the LifeDrive seems to have issues with Palm OS backup programs and some popular ones will not work. You can, however, find a list of LifeDrive-compatible programs at www.palmmfocus.com/ldsoftware.php, and there are a few backup programs listed. ☺

